

This is Mrs. Audry Ward who is a home-grown expert on Shoshone culture. She is a Shoshone and lives on the Wind River Indian Reservation, Wyoming.

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INTERVIEWER: Robin Levin

QUESTION: Could you please tell us of the Shoshone Creation myth?

ANSWER: Well, I don't think that it's appropriate right now. First, I should try to explain how the tales or stories, we might call them, or as educators call it, Mythology (fit into the culture.)

Actually, I will quote: "Tales are an overwhelming part of the oral transmission of tribal lore which has come through the medium of Mythology. These are told by old people on winter evenings."

Tales were, for a student to understand, something like... to the adult, would be moralistic. We'd describe it as real or, that it's an open education which is set only to a minor degree.

Q: [Mythologies are not as strict as science?]

A: It's adopted to a child's taste, and lots of times the children are the heroes. They play the important role.

"Then we have explanatory elements in regard to the different phenomena or facts or events, which can be observed by the person or child," that's listening to the story. (I say tales.) A lot of these tales are repeated over and over.

Q: You say that sometimes the storyteller will make the child as the hero. Does the storyteller try to keep the same tale in tact for the same listener?

A: [I think, more or less, it is because each time it's changed.] I mean, the same story is told repeatedly, but each time, the story is adjusted to fit the listener's level. That is how we would classify the change in the modern schools. So, the tale is repeated many times for the child.

Q: Are you saying that the tale grows with the child?

A: Right. A lot of the stories, the tales, are teachings and usually an educational thing of teaching them right from wrong, bad/good, evil or whatever.

Q: When was the first time that this oral history, this oral morality was written down?

A: [When?] I think it was in the early 30's. No, further back; maybe during the days of Lewis and Clark. (1804-1806)

Q: So before the White Man came into the picture, this was strictly oral history. Would you say that the culture was kept in tact through this oral exchange of tales and myths?

A: I think so, and through the teachings, the children had respect. The mythology focuses on a few relationships, like father and child, brothers and sisters, and above all, two brothers (who) love one another. Also are the relationships between uncles and aunts, and nephews and nieces. Grandparents or grandchildren either love or hate one another. Brothers-in-law or sisters-in-law are good friends, and all grandparents either paternal or maternal, are loving toward their grandchildren. They are always rearing, educating and rescuing them, in case of any kind of danger.

Q: Is this still true today?

A: Not quite. The Indian people have adopted the more modern ways of life and this has been true since the early 1800's when the missionaries came. They were educated to the White Man's world, what we would term as White Man's world. But actually, they are people of all creation which the mythology would also refer to. And I think that goes back to your first question about the Creator.

Q: Are the Creation Myth and Biblical creation the same?

A: I would say they are, because in the teachings of creation, the Indian children were taught that the Creator was God and God is the Creator of all things, which are man and whatever. Even today the Indian children still respect the Creator, which is God.

Q: Father of All Creation...

A: Right, that's the phrase I would use. It's really hard to explain to a non-speaking Indian, or a non-Indian because in the language, it's understood very clearly. I speak my language among my generation. We understand it clearly, but then the non-speaking Indian; it's hard for them.

Q: When you explain to me, you have to put it in very specific language. How do you refer to the Father of All Creation in the Shoshone language?

A: We say, "Our Father" which translated is D_____, it means, just like I said, it's really hard to explain because each word has a different meaning and for each word you have to have an explanation. The word itself doesn't really mean what it sounds like.

For instance, you say "God" in the Biblical term, we know as the Creator. I hope I'm not confusing you, but when you use the Shoshone language, the word itself has so many meanings. In a sentence, one word is explained in different ways.

Q: Is D_____ (Father of All Creation) one word?

A: It's OUR FATHER. And also, any time you talk about creation, you refer to OUR FATHER, or D_____. In general terms, it means CREATION OF ALL THINGS.

Q: It means creation as a concept in addition to God as the Creator?

A: Um hm.

Q: How did Shoshone people manage to adopt Christianity so well and fully?

A: It was through a missionary who came through here. That was 1873, I'm guessing. When he (Dr. John Roberts) came here, of course he found that the Shoshone people were very religious people and they always knew that there was a Creator somewhere. Because, you know, Creation wasn't just there, it had to be created someway. So, they accepted that there was a Creator. That's the way it's explained to me in my language.

They refer to the earth as Mother Earth. Beyond that there was someone, what's the word...Supernatural. No, there was another word that was really super in our language. I think anthropologists would say, "something that is beyond human comprehension". That goes way back.

Christianity would talk about it today and explain it so that the younger generation could understand it. In the language it would be very hard to explain, because they knew that there was a Creator. It's just as simple as that.

Q: No question about it?

A: No question about it. But, everything was always a symbol. That was in the next generation, though. But beyond that, there was a God. They knew there was a God or OUR FATHER, or D _____ (Shoshone translation).

Q: Do you feel the Shoshone should have kept their own mythology more strongly?

A: Yes, in a way. But I don't really think so: the good parts, yes. In the Indian mythology or Shoshone mythology, there are a lot of taboos. I don't think I would want the children to grow up in that.

Q: What are some of the taboos which have been dropped?

A: The term I use is, Superstition, and I grew up with that. And I don't favor it. You grew up to fear Nature. That part has been dropped and forgotten and that's a good thing.

There are a few people who try to practice it but the people who were raised and brought up with it don't try to practice it. Some of the meanings are very scary. Children would call it spooky. You are dealing with demons, I think, and devils and things like that.

Q: What was the purpose for the scary tales?

A: It was primarily for education, to teach right from wrong, good from bad.

Q: Through the device of fear?

A: Yes. I'll give you an example. There are beings called the Ninimbe and they put a fear into a family. For instance,

if there were a dwarf-like child born into a family, well, then they'd take it to a medicine man. The medicine man would tell them that they would have to do something about that child because Ninimbe had possessed his body or her body. The only cure they would have is to take the child somewhere to let it die. And when the body died, the Ninimbe would release the soul.

That's the kind of taboo that I wouldn't want my children to be practicing.

Q: Could you speak more about the Ninimbe? What is it?

A: From what I was told, there are very few people who will see him in existence.

In some terms, you use Blessed. In other terms, it is a sign of death or bad luck, or something like that. A lot of people feared Ninimbe. In fact, some earlier reports indicated that when people were ill and they didn't know what was wrong with them, they went to the medicine man. The Indian people or the medicine man had already analyzed the situation, and the illness was due to the fact that they were shot with an arrowhead from Ninimbe's arrow. And that was believed to cause the disease.

Once medicine came into existence, it was found that they had had tuberculosis.

When the missionaries; the modern Christianity came into existence and did away with all that. It took the fear out of the Indian people and so, they accepted it. I imagine the Missionary (Dr. Roberts) explained to them in such a way that God was good and Our Father was good. He had to translate that into the Shoshone language for them, so that they would understand. They immediately accepted this kind of Christianity.

A long time ago this earth was made. Nobody knows when, but there is a story about it.

Our father was on this earth. When he was here, the earth got on fire. He had a wife who stood his left side. Their son stood at his right side. When the earth was burning, they walked among the flames.

As they were walking, the Father said to his wife and to his son, "Don't look back at the fire. No matter if it is burning your heels, don't look back."

Right behind them the flames made a roaring, and the fire was ready to catch in their skirts. The woman felt it. She looked behind her

and immediately was turned into stone. She was turned into stone because she had done what the Father had told her not to.

He had a walking stick. Wherever he and his son walked, he put his walking stick on the ground ahead of them. There the flames went out, and so the Father and his son could pass through the fire.

Everything around them was burning, the whole earth. But because of the walking stick, they could travel around.

Behind the fire came the water. Soon it flooded the whole earth. Everything was covered by water even the mountains.

The Father and his son made themselves very small so that they could ride on the foam on top of the water. There they remained for a long time, on the water-foam.

Thinking about the earth where he had lived, the Father knew he would like to have it back again. He used to wonder, "How can I get the earth back again?"

For many years the water stayed like that. At last the Father knew that it would not go down or dry up. He stayed there on the water-foam another winter. During the time they lived on the water the Father made his son part of himself. Now they could get the earth back again.

"How can I get Help," he wondered. He thought of the water-people. "I could ask them to help me get earth," he said to himself. "They must be somewhere around here."

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Then he called out, "Water-people, where are you? Come. Let us smoke and hold council."
Beaver came when he heard the call:

"Are you good at diving in the water," asked the Father.

"I am not a good diver. This is too much for me. I have a younger brother. He could. He is a good diver."

So the Father called out again. "Where are you, water-people? Come. Let us smoke and hold council."

Muskrat came and the three smoked. Then the Father said, "We will call for more people."

"Once again he called out, "Where are you, water-people? Come. Let us smoke and hold council."

Otter came and the four smoked together. They held council. Then they said to Muskrat, "You dive to the bottom of the water and bring up earth."

"I will," he replied. "I will go now, at once." And then he dived off from the water-foam, where they all were sitting.

The three waited for Muskrat to come up. They waited and they waited. When they were just about to give up, they saw his body coming up to the top of the water. He was bloated with water. He had drowned.

They pulled him up on the foam, and the Father made him come to life again. Under Muskrat's fingernails, they found bits of mud. The Father took these bits of mud and formed them into a little ball.

"You did get earth," he said to Muskrat. Then the Father began to roll the ball of earth in his hands, to and fro.

Then he would stretch it, and then roll it into a ball again. Then he would flatten it between his hands.

He did that again and again, and earth-ball got bigger and bigger. The bigger it got, the harder it was for him to work with it. He would stop and

look at it and would say, "It is too small yet." Soon he would work it again.

He stretched it and then rolled it into a ball again. Then he would flatten it between his hands.

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He stretched it, he rolled it, he flattened it, he spread it over the top of the water. Then he began to make hills and mountains on his earth.

Later he made springs and rivers beside these mountains.

Later he made different kinds of trees and flowers to grow around the springs and on the mountains.

Then he made different kinds of animals and birds.

After the Father had finished making all this, he made the earth so that it would turn. He made it turn to the shady side, and it got winter.

He made it turn to the sunny side, and it got summer.